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ABSTRACT

Focused on the topic of ability grouping in reading instruction, particularly at the elementary level, this annotated bibliography contains 31 references to articles and papers entered in the ERIC database between 1983 and 1989. The citations include articles discussing recent research on ability grouping, and possible alternatives to ability grouping, such as cooperative learning and whole language techniques. (MM)

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Ability Grouping in Reading Instruction: Research and Alternatives

by Mary Morgan

Ability grouping—grouping students for instruction by ability or achievement to create homogeneous instructional groups—has long been an accepted technique for teaching reading. Recently, however, some research has indicated that ability grouping does not enhance student achievement and may, in addition, have negative effects on the self-concepts of students in lower groups. Yet if ability grouping is not an effective instructional technique, what are the valid alternatives for reading instruction?

This *FAST Bib* addresses the issue of ability grouping in reading instruction, particularly at the elementary level, and begins with an overview discussing the social and political implications of classroom organization. The next section presents citations concerning research on ability grouping, focusing on its instructional effectiveness as well as its effect on students' self-concepts. In the final section, possible alternatives to ability grouping are considered, including documents on cooperative learning and whole language techniques.

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Overview

Dreeben, Robert. "The Social Organization of Mathematics and Reading Instruction." Paper presented at the 69th Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 1985. 13 p. [ED 262 877]

Questions the nature of classroom instruction in general, and mathematics and reading instruction in the lower elementary school grades, in particular. Focuses on the following aspects of the social organization of instruction: 1) the diversity

of student populations, 2) the motivating force behind instruction, and 3) the social arrangements through which the ongoing monitoring of student work transpires.

Fraatz, Jo Michelle Beld. *The Politics of Reading: Power, Opportunity, and Prospects for Change in America's Public Schools*, 1987. 237 p. [Available from Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027; document not available from EDRS] [ED 283 133]

Argues that the relationships of power and influence between people in schools dramatically affect the kinds of opportunities available to low-income children learning to read.

Recent Research

Alvermann, Donna E., ed.; and others. *Research within Reach: Secondary School Reading. A Research Guided Response to Concerns of Reading Educators (Revised)*. International Reading Association, Newark, DE, 1987. 201 p. [ED 282 187]

Synthesizes reading research in several significant areas and makes concrete suggestions for using this research to improve reading instruction. Chapter 10 focuses on grouping in reading instruction.

Barr, Rebecca; Dreeben, Robert. "The Formation and Instruction of Ability Groups," *American Journal of Education*, v97 n1 p34-64 Nov 1988.

Examines the effect of ability grouping on first-grade students' reading achievement. Contradicts the contention that grouping has a negative effect on low-achieving students. Finds that students' success depended on the quality of instruction, referring to the appropriate combination of instructional conditions.

Eder, Donna. "Ability Grouping and Students' Academic Self-Concepts: A Case Study," *Elementary School Journal*, v84 n2 p149-61 Nov 1983.

Examines: 1) the degree to which first-grade students engaged in within-group and across-group comparisons and were aware of group differences; and 2) the relationship between teacher praise and students' group levels and academic performances.

Eldredge, J. Lloyd; Butterfield, Dennie. *Sacred Cows Make Good Hamburger. A Report on a Reading Research Project Titled "Testing the Sacred Cows in Reading,"* 1984. 93 p. [ED 255 861]

Because of concern about the harmful effects of placing children in low reading groups, this study tested several "sacred cows" in reading, including the homogeneous grouping practices currently utilized in most classrooms in the United States.

Felmlee, Diane; Eder, Donna. "Contextual Effects in the Classroom: The Impact of Ability Groups on Student Attention," *Sociology of Education*, v56 n2 p77-87 Apr 1983.

Examines how students' ability group assignments affect their attention spans. Finds that assignment to low-ability groups had a strong negative effect on student attentiveness, suggesting that classroom factors are important in shaping student behavior.

Gamoran, Adam. "Instructional and Institutional Effects of Ability Grouping," *Sociology of Education*, v59 n4 p185-98 Oct 1986.

Reviews research findings on ability grouping. Attempts to document the mechanisms through which stratification in schools influences student achievement, focusing on within-classroom ability grouping in 12 first grade classes. Results indicate that grouping has no direct effect on reading achievement by the end of the year.

Gamoran, Adam. "Egalitarian versus Elitist Use of Ability Grouping." Paper presented at the 68th Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 1984. 35 p. [ED 245 821]

Investigates two questions about the effects of grouping: 1) does a student's within-class group rank affect his or her learning when individual ability and instructional content are held statistically constant? and 2) do teachers utilize grouping in ways that have varied effects on student learning? Suggests that the consequences of grouping are not inherently detrimental but rather depend on how grouping is employed.

Gamoran, Adam. "The Institutionalization of Educational Stratification." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1984. 33 p. [ED 253 849]

Investigates the simultaneous effects of the rank of students' reading groups in first grade and their first grade achievement on their assignment to reading groups at the beginning of second grade.

Haller, Emil J.; Waterman, Margaret. "The Criteria of Reading Group Assignments," *Reading*

Teacher, v38 n8 p772-81 Apr 1985.

Concludes that children's reading ability is not the sole reason behind their placement in particular reading groups and that teachers also consider such things as their ability to do academic work, work habits, classroom behavior, personality, and, occasionally, their home environment.

Hallinan, Maureen T.; Sorensen, Aage B. "Ability Grouping and Student Friendships," *American Educational Research Journal*, v22 n4 p485-99 Win 1985.

Examines the relationship between grouping and friendship in a longitudinal data set containing information on students in 110 reading groups in 32 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classrooms.

Hallinan, Maureen T.; Sorensen, Aage B. "The Formation and Stability of Instructional Groups," *American Sociological Review*, v48 n6 p838-51 Dec 1983.

Using empirical evidence from 48 classrooms, this article argues that structural and organizational factors affect the stability and the formation of ability groups in an elementary classroom, which in turn affect growth in academic achievement. Holds that teachers are often impeded from forming the types of groups most conducive to student learning.

Harp, Bill. "What Do We Know about Ability Grouping? (When the Principal Asks)," *Reading Teacher*, v42 n6 p430-31 Feb 1989.

Reviews research on ability grouping. Notes several negative effects of ability grouping, and discusses the implications of this research for classroom practice.

Heller, Emil J. "Pupil Race and Elementary School Ability Grouping: Are Teachers Biased against Black Children?" *American Educational Research Journal*, v22 n4 p465-83 Win 1985.

Investigates the claim that pupil race affects the reading grouping decisions of elementary school teachers, causing Black children to be overrepresented in lower ability groups. These analyses failed to uncover evidence of racial bias, though Black pupils were more likely to be placed in the lowest groups.

Hiebert, Elfrieda H. "An Examination of Ability Grouping for Reading Instruction," *Reading Research Quarterly*, v18 n2 p231-55 Win 1983.

Reviews the literature on the nature of processes within reading groups of different ability levels and the effects of these processes on children's reading development. Presents a perspective on instructional-social contexts for reading instruction.

Slavin, Robert E. "Ability Grouping and Student Achievement in Elementary Schools: A Best-Evidence Synthesis," *Review of Educational Research*, v57 n3 p293-336 Fall 1987.

Reviews research of between-class and within-class ability grouping on the achievement of elementary students. Ability grouping appears most effective for specific subjects with students remaining in heterogeneous classes most of the day. Cross-grade assignment for selected subjects can increase achievement.

Slavin, Robert E. "Grouping for Instruction: Equity and Effectiveness," *Equity and Excellence*, v23 n1-2 p31-6 Spr 1987 (Special issue on Ethnic and Ability Grouping).

Reviews briefly the research on achievement effects of the following: (1) ability-grouped class assignment; and (2) student grouping alternatives that would accommodate learning differences among students. Discusses instructional effectiveness of those alternatives and their potential impact on segregation.

Slavin, Robert E. "Ability Grouping and Its Alternatives: Must We Track?" *American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers*, v11 n2 p32-36,47-48 Sum 1987.

Reviews research on student grouping, focusing on these types: tracking; grouping within classes (reading and mathematics); ability grouping for just one or two subjects; and classes for the gifted and handicapped. Asserts that ability-grouped class assignment is the most harmful form.

Alternatives to Ability Grouping

Burchby, Marcia. "Literature and Whole Language," *New Advocate*, v1 n2 p114-23 Spr 1988.

Summarizes some of the criticisms which have been directed at basal instruction. Discusses how whole language approaches enhance the ability to teach children to read, and engage students in a democratic and democratizing educational experience.

Canady, Robert Lynn; Hotchkiss, Phyllis R. "Scheduling Practices and Policies Associated with Increased Achievement for Low Achieving Students," *Journal of Negro Education,* v54 n3 p344-55 Sum 1985.

Presents two basic parallel block elementary school schedules (schedules in which a block of time is scheduled for essential and/or desired small skill groups parallel to instructional activities in large groups). Contends that parallel block scheduling in elementary schools can lead to improved instructional programs for low achievers.

Dunn, Rita; and others. "A Timely Solution: Effects of Chronobiology on Achievement and Behavior," *Clearing House,* v61 n1 p5-8 Sep 1987.

Advances the notion that students should be assigned to classes according to the time of day they learn best.

Durkin, Dolores. *Teaching Them to Read. Fifth Edition.* Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston, MA, 1989. 532 p. [CS 009 500]

Intended for teachers and prospective teachers, this book provides information about reading instruction from kindergarten through the elementary grades. Includes a chapter on organizing for instructional needs.

Eldredge, J. Lloyd; Butterfield, Dennie. "Alternatives to Traditional Reading Instruction," *Reading Teacher,* v40 n1 p32-37 Oct 1986.

Concludes that three experimental programs were more effective than traditional approaches in beginning reading instruction: (1) a literature program using special decoding strategies; (2) a literature program not using the special strategies; and (3) a traditional basal approach using the special decoding strategies.

Emmer, Edmund T. *Management and Instruction Strategies for Heterogeneous Elementary School Classrooms. R&D Report No. 6009.* Texas Univ., Austin. Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, 1984. 40 p. [ED 251 431]

Describes a variety of methods that can be used for instructing classes with students whose abilities and backgrounds vary widely, including individualization of instruction, homogeneous grouping, team teaching, and modifying whole-class instruction.

Halpern, Honey. "Classroom Scene: Contemporary Canadian Children's Literature for the Intermediate Grades: A Whole Language Approach," *Reading Canada Lecture,* v5 n4 p268-73 Win 1987.

Presents effective methods for the discussion, sharpening, and enrichment of readers' responses. Includes methods to teach students how to choose a good book, an individualized and/or group reading and response program, and journal writing techniques. Provides a bibliography of Canadian children's literature for intermediate grades.

Harp, Bill. "What Do We Do in the Place of Ability Grouping? (When the Principal Asks)," *Reading Teacher,* v42 n7 p534-35 Mar 1989.

Presents two alternatives to ability grouping—flexible grouping (based on students' level of independence as learners), and cooperative learning groups. Discusses the benefits of cooperative learning and provides a sample cooperative learning lesson.

Morris, Darrell. *Teaching Reading in Kindergarten: A Language-Experience Approach. Occasional Paper No. 13.* National College of Education, Evanston, IL, 1986. 45 p. [ED 276 975]

Presents a kindergarten reading curriculum, including a description of major instructional techniques, a time-line illustrating how instruction might evolve across the school year, and finally, a battery of informal tasks for assessing reading ability at the end of the kindergarten year.

Park, Barbara. "Outdated Teaching Practices Hamper Literacy Development," *Highway One,* v9 n2 p67-70 Spr 1986.

Points out that traditional teaching methods, which have been replaced by more effective methods for the majority of students, are still used for low-ability students. Argues that these students need the best materials available and teachers who are knowledgeable about current educational theories.

Slavin, Robert. "Cooperative Learning: Can Students Help Students Learn?" *Instructor,* v96 n7 p74-76,78 Mar 1987.

The concept of student team learning is described, with details on cooperative learning techniques developed for reorganizing classrooms into exciting, high-achieving places.

Unsworth, Len. "Meeting Individual Needs through Flexible Within-Class Grouping of Pu-

pils," *Reading Teacher*, v38 n3 p298-304 Dec 1984.

Offers an example of how to use flexible reading groups to attain the greatest level of student achievement.

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